

# RELIGION AS A TOOL OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN THE 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGNS IN NIGERIA

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## **Abstract**

This study investigated the use of religion as a tool of political communication in the 2023 presidential election campaigns in Nigeria, against the backdrop of the country's claim of secularism. Section 10 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, states that: The government of the Federation or the State shall not adopt any religion as the state religion. The same Constitution acknowledges the right of Nigerian to Shari'a justice in Section 275 (1) by providing that there shall be for any State that requires it a Shari'a Court of Appeal for that State and in Section 260(1) that there shall be a Shari'a Court of Appeal of the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. From all these, is Nigeria truly a secular country? Is the claim of secularism a deliberate hypocrisy? These are questions that beg for answers. The study adopted survey research design with questionnaire as the instrument for data collection. The respondents comprised 250 persons randomly selected from Enugu and Lagos States (in Southern part of Nigeria); Kano and Benue States (in Northern part of Nigeria) and Abuja (Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory). The study found that religion was used as a tool for political communication in the 2023 presidential election campaigns in Nigeria and that the use of religious appeals influenced electorate's choice of candidates in the 2023 presidential elections. The study recommends separation of religion from politics in Nigeria to allow competence, capacity and track records determine choice of candidates for elective positions in the country.

**Keywords:** Religion, political communication, Nigeria, presidential, campaign

## **Introduction**

Nigeria's keenly contested and much-talked-about 2023 presidential election has thrown up numerous interesting discussion points on the country's constitutionally guaranteed secularity and the actual relationship and interplay of politics and religion in Nigeria. It is public knowledge that religion was exploited, implicitly and explicitly, as a veritable tool in the rabble-raising 2023 presidential electioneering campaigns in Nigeria.

Religion is one of the potent instruments of social control and coordination. Members of different religious sects exhibit love and extol oneness among them. The feeling of esprit de coup strengthens togetherness and mutual understanding within religious groups. The potency of religion as a binding force knitting its faithful together facilitates effective communication and cordial relationship among such faithful. In recent years, politics seems to have made significant inroads into religion, vis-à-vis. Politicians and their political parties and associates take their campaigns for elective positions to religious groups and organizations for solicitation of support. On the other hand, religious groups participate in politics in some ways, mostly in non partisan

posture.

There appears to be a symbiotic relationship between religion and politics. Their relationship is intimate because there is always a point of convergence between religion and politics. The relationship is equally complex because of the intricacies inherent in the politicization of religion (Oshewolo and Maren, 2015). Man is a political animal, according to Aristotle (Mukherjee and Ramaswamy 2007). Jawondo (2005) has taken Aristotle's historic philosophical assertion further by depicting man as both a religious and political animal. Man is, therefore, a being torn between his political aspirations and inclinations and his religious belief system. In this complexity of man, religion influences the socio-political and economic spheres of man's existence, just as religion is influenced by these spheres (Kalu, 2010).

Nigeria claims to be a secular country. Section 10 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, states that: The government of the Federation or the State shall not adopt any religion as the state religion. Also, Section 38(1) of the Constitution provides that every person shall be entitled to the freedom of thought, conscience and religion including freedom to change his religion or belief, and (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate its religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance. This notwithstanding, there seems to be some level of fusion of religion and politics in Nigeria. Religion is a potent factor in Nigerian politics, thereby threatening her claim of secularity (Umeanolue, 2020).

The 2023 presidential electioneering campaigns underscored the huge impact of religion in the Nigerian political equation. It simply demonstrated that religion has taken a position of importance in Nigerian politics (Afolabi, 2015). The choices of candidates and their running mates by political parties in the presidential election and the tone and pattern of the eventual electioneering campaigns were steeped in religious considerations and appeals. This study examined the use of religion as a tool of political communication in the 2023 presidential election campaigns in Nigeria, with a view to determining the influence of religion on politics in the country.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

The key terms used in this study are defined and explained here for proper conceptualization and clarity.

#### **Religion**

Religion has been variously defined by different scholars and experts in the field (Obaji, Agbiji and Swart, 2015; Koenig, 2009; Schuurman, 2011; Orji, 2011; Ndukwe and Iheaka, 2023; Mandaville & James, 2010; Mandaville & James, 2010; Oshewolo and Maren, 2015). Smith (1996, p.5) defines religion as "a system of beliefs and practices oriented toward the sacred or supernatural, through which the life experiences of groups of people are given meaning and direction." Similarly, Ugwu (2002, p.2) defines religion as "faith and practices involving the relationship between mankind and what is regarded as sacred." Religion is equally perceived as "the outward existence of God to whom obedience, service and honour are due, the feeling or expression of human love, fear or awe of some superhuman and over-ruling power, whether by profession of belief, by observance of rites and ceremonies or by the conduct of life" (Merriam, 1980, p. 250). It is a belief system that determines and conditions man's relationship with his

God and his attitude and reactions to other people, situations and events in his environment.

### **Politics**

Politics is the processes of acquisition and utilization of power for governance and administration. According to Hornby (2000), politics has to do with “the activities involved in getting and using power in public life, and being able to influence decisions that affect a country or a society” (p. 899). Politics “may be correctly defined as all those activities which are directly or indirectly associated with the seizure of state power, the consolidation of state power and the use of state power” (Nnoli, p.7).

### **Political Communication**

There are some forms of communication in all realms and facets of the human society. Communication in the domain of politics, whether before, during or after elections, is classified as political communication. Political communication embodies various activities and processes of passing political information to the electorate and the citizenry at large. Gonçalves, G (2018)

The concept of political communication refers to both a set of professional practices and a theoretical and scholarly discipline. As a professional practice, the term “political communication” suggests a series of communication processes that have been given labels as varied as propaganda, electoral marketing, political marketing, political campaigning, and political public relations. Political communication has developed into an academic field of inquiry, with foundations in theories and methods from communication, political science, sociology, psychology, marketing, history, rhetoric, and other fields. Its multidisciplinary nature explains the difficulty in finding a straightforward definition. But it is agreed that political communication focuses on interaction between political actors, the media, and citizens, which is marked by its persuasive and strategic character.

Liaw, Moiden and Yacob (2022) explain that

Political communication is very important for the victory of election candidates. Proper political communication will enhance a candidate's image in the eyes of voters and reprehensible political communication will tarnish a candidate's credibility. The candidate's political communication is not only seen in the communication of the contesting candidate, but the voters will observe the communication of the entire electoral machinery. Therefore, every election candidate should formulate, apply and examine political communication from time to time. An election candidate's political communication begins when his name is announced as an election candidate and ends the first phase after the end of the voting process. The second phase of political communication in a new dimension with a different approach will begin if the candidate is elected as the people's representative.

Gackowski (2013)

"political communication" is a process of interaction between political elites, the mass media and the public, whose purpose is to generate a politically relevant content in media coverage, including monitoring, analyzing and commenting on current policies, periodically assessing the government for their campaign promises (and also the later ones) in the name of society – citizens / voters and also forming and expressing the attitude of public opinion to the policy and political

elites, which are in power.”

### **Objectives of the Study**

The study aimed to:

1. Find out whether religion was used as a tool of political communication in the 2023 presidential election campaigns in Nigeria
2. Ascertain the ways in which religious appeals were employed in the 2023 presidential campaigns in Nigeria
3. Determine the influence of use of religious appeals on electorate’s choice of candidates in the 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria.

### **Methodology**

The study adopted survey research design. Questionnaire was used as the instrument for data collection in the study. A total of 250 copies of the questionnaire were administered to the 250 respondents randomly selected from Enugu and Lagos States in Southern part of Nigeria; Kano and Benue States in Northern part of Nigeria and Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria.

### **Religion and Politics**

Religion and politics are two phenomena that have enjoyed differing appreciable levels of interaction and relationship in different countries of the world. The mutuality between politics and religion has attracted huge research interests, amidst claims of secularism. The democratic utilities of religion include the integration of human societies made up of individuals and social groups with diverse interests, beliefs and aspirations. Religion possesses the ability to legitimize the existing socio-political order in the society (Oshewolo and Maren, 2015; Schaefer and Lamn, 1997:273-275). Religion has been adjudged to perform six interrelated functions that are politically relevant. Such roles include “restraining or criticizing the conduct of government, encouraging political participation, promoting democratic values and norm, articulating and aggregating distinctive societal interests, generating cross-cutting identities and providing avenues for the development of leadership skills” (Rotimi, Mala and Aiyegboyin, 1999, p.35).

Sobolewska, Fisher, Heath and Sanders (2015) found that active church membership among ethnic and racial minorities is linked to higher political participation in the United States. In this connection, in their work, *The Relationship between Church and State*, Kasomo and Naila (2013) observe that the “church and state are two realms inseparable basically because they concern the same subject matter, namely man and woman, who are both material and spiritual.” The interplay of religion and politics explains why it has been argued that the relationship between religion and politics is like the relationship between insects and flowers (Kristyanto, Sianipar, Nugroho and Destyanto, 2021). This clearly points to the reciprocity of the relationship between politics and religion. The results of this reciprocal relationship between religion and politics is the claim that religion can bring about sustainable political development through the inculcation of high sense of duty, morality, selfless service, respect for the sanctity of human life, public accountability, love of one’s neighbours, sense of humanity and abhorrence of violence. Religion can also contribute to national integration, political mobilization, reformation of ethnic identity, nationalism, peaceful co-existence, economic, social and political development (Ikechi-Ekpendu, Audu and Ekpendu, 2016; Afolabi, 2015).

To show the amazing intricacies of the concept of politics in religion, it is important to note that there exists internal politics within religion. Eleagu (2018, p.319) explains that “religion is one of the most vexatious and contentious issues across the globe. Intrinsic in religion is the characteristic of power. This power characteristic positions it inextricably from politics in Nigeria, as in other countries.” From this standpoint, it is safe and correct to validly argue that there is religion within politics and politics within religion.

Secularization theory and its proponents try to undermine the effect of religion on politics and the society at large. However, research evidence indicates that the vast majority of people in the world profess a strong allegiance to some spiritual faith (Gill, 2001). The World Values Survey found that more than three quarters of the respondents in 43 countries continue to profess a belief in some supernatural deity, 63% consider themselves religious, and 70% claim to belong to a religious denomination (Inglehart, Basañez and Moreno, 1998). The resurgence of religious fundamentalism in some parts of the world in recent years, which has shaped political developments in the affected countries, puts a big question mark on the claims of the secularization theory on the irrelevance of religion. Xia (2021) reports that the influence of religion has declined in the political arena due to the structural secularization of European societies; but it is noted that in Western Europe, religion, particularly Christianity, has played a key role in political systems. This is attributable to the emergence of political parties with strong connection to Christianity (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; Manza & Wright, 2003, Xia (2021, Knutsen, 2004; van der Brug, Hobolt and Vreese, 2009; Kriesi, Grande, Lachat, Dolezal, Bornschie, and Frey, 2008; Jansen, de Graaf, and Need, 2012; Otjes, 2021 ).

Two concepts need to be separated to clearly understand the influence of religion on politics. The two concepts are religion and religiosity. The decline in religiosity does not mean decline in the relevance and influence of religion on politics. Xia (2021) notes that “while religiosity and its connection to voting behavior could be decreasing, religion seems to have maintained and even remained relevant in Western politics within the growing salience and intensifying politicization of cultural politics over the past two decades.” The election of Donald Trump as the U.S. President, the Brexit Referendum in the United Kingdom and the electoral gains of populist radical right parties across Europe have been cited as the evidence of the consequences of religion on political processes. This is why “Moral polarization” and “cultural backlash” are among the most discussed terms in intellectual debates and public discourse across the globe (Xia, 2021; Fiorina and Abrams, 2008; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Rapp, 2016).

### **Religion and Politics in Nigeria**

Africa is a heavily religious continent. Religion is an inextricable part of the African society. Although Secular modernism attempts to separate religion from the socio-economic and political spheres of the human society, religion has continued to permeate all aspects of life in Africa (Clarke and Jennings 2008; Obaji, Agbiji and Swart, 2015; Kalu, 2010b).

The religious status of Nigeria as a secular country, going by the tone of section 10 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as Amended), cited earlier in this study, has been a topic of hot debate. Kukah (1999, p.102) states that “The debate over the religious status of the Nigeria state remains one of the most passionate and acrimonious. The debate has often been beclouded by bellicosity, zealotry, arrogance and prejudices. In the end, there has always been more heat than light.” The same Constitution acknowledges the right of Nigerians to Shari’a

justice in Section 275 (1) by providing that there shall be for any State that requires it a Shari'a Court of Appeal for that State and in Section 260(1) that there shall be a Shari'a Court of Appeal of the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. From all these, is Nigeria truly a secular country? Is the claim of secularism a deliberate hypocrisy? These are questions that beg for answers.

Religion has significantly influenced politics in Nigeria (Eso, 2003; Omoregbe, 2003; Umeanolue, 2020). There are three ways in which religion has influenced politics in Nigeria. These are the direct involvement of religious men in politics; fusing of religion and politics and subjection of politics or government to the doctrine or laws of religion, thereby carrying out politics or governance along the line of religious doctrine, ideals or laws (Omoregbe, 2003). In line with the foregoing, Falana (2010) argues that

The real basis of the manipulation of religion in Nigeria today is the need to obscure from the people of Nigeria, a fundamental aspect of our reality; that is the domination of our political economy by a class of intermediaries who are being increasingly exposed. And this is to enable this class to cover themselves with religious and ethnic disguises in order to further entrench division among our people, slow down their awakening at any cost; even the unity of our country for which so much has been sacrificed.

The phenomenon of religious politics in Nigerian is glaringly obvious. This manifests in political aspects like the style of governance, policy formulations and the electoral process in Nigeria. In all these, religion has remained a strong determining factor (Umeanolue, 2020). One would wonder why a country that claims to be secular would establish the Pilgrim Welfare Boards run by Nigerian governments. The two major religions in Nigeria – Christianity and Islam – are the beneficiaries. The African Traditional Religion, which is another strong religion in Nigeria, does not benefit from this. In other words, Christianity and Islam have noticeably influenced politics in Nigeria. Onwubiko (2010, pp.137-138) rightly posits that;

The two dominant religious organizations viz: Christian religion and Moslem religion have held both the federal and state governments on the jugular veins to be committing unimaginable amount of scarce public funds to sponsoring their adherents to the yearly pilgrimages abroad. Since the blackmail to sabotage government if it fails to sponsor pilgrimages gained ascendancy, federal and state governments have been contending with the needs of these religious organizations and their leaders.

Findings of many studies have clearly indicated that Nigeria is among the most religious countries in the world. Pew Research Center's 2015 Global Attitudes Survey showed that Nigerians are the ninth most religious peoples in the world, with 88% positive responses from them that 'religion plays a very important role in their lives' (Theodorou, 2015; Onapajo, 2016). Also, a 2005 survey study by the BBC World Service found that 85% of Nigerians 'trusted religious leaders and a similar proportion were willing to give them more power' (Onapajo, 2016; Ferrett, 2005). These findings negate the claims of secularization in Nigeria. Gill (2001, p. 119) assert that "If there ever were an award for the most durable, yet outdated, theoretical perspective in the social sciences, secularization theory would be the winner, or at least a close runner-up." This assertion

supports Stark and Finke's (2000, p. 79) conclusion that "After nearly three centuries of utterly failed prophecies and misrepresentations ... it seems time to carry the secularization doctrine to the graveyard of failed theories, and there to whisper 'requiescat in pace.'"

Research findings have equally indicated that politics in Nigeria has been replete with numerous anomalies and upheavals because the country's leaders, past and present, have dragged religion and ethnicity into politics in their quests for leadership positions. Religion has played a key role in the country's political arrangements, right from the early days of elections in Nigeria. This is more prominent in the northern part of the country, in view of the overwhelming influence of religion in the northern social system. The first political parties that emerged in the 1950s took some religious coloration. The three major northern political parties that emerged – the Northern People's Congress (NPC), the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) and the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) – displayed a religious character. The Northern People's Congress (NPC), which was the most popular party in the region, was, unarguably, heavily influenced by Islam (Onapajo, 2016; Ntamu, Abia, Edinyang, and Eneji, 2014).

One issue that must be stressed in the obvious interplay of politics and religion in Nigeria is tolerance. Habermas (2008, p. 7), cited in Tarihi (2021), explains that "tolerance means that believers of one faith, of a different faith and non-believers, must mutually concede to one another the right to those convictions, practices and ways of living that they themselves reject." It has been argued that the liberal idea of toleration is the moral foundation of democracy and the basis for the justification of cultural, moral, or political pluralism (Ekwunife, 1992; Kukathas, 2003; Kukathas, 1992; Habermas, 2004). A pluralistic country like Nigeria cannot grow without religious tolerance.

### **Use of Religious Appeals in 2023 Presidential Campaigns in Nigeria**

Religion and ethnicity were the two most conspicuous factors that characterized the 2023 presidential election campaigns in Nigeria. Politicians, political parties, supporters and apologists were vociferous and aggressive in their application of religious appeals during the campaigns. In addition to issues bordering on ethnicity, corruption, perjury and other misdeeds, religion was a strong force that dominated the 2023 presidential campaigns in Nigeria. The influence and relevance of religion and religious appeal in Nigerian politics, once more, came to the front burner when the presidential candidate of the All Progressives Congress (APC), Senator Bola Ahmed Tinubu, who is a Muslim, picked another Muslim, Senator Kashim Shettima, as his running mate. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and prominent Church leaders in Nigeria rose against the Muslim-Muslim ticket, describing it as a ploy to Islamize Nigeria. However, Muslim groups in Nigeria threw their full weights behind the Muslim-Muslim ticket.

The four major political parties in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria anchored their campaigns on religion and religious appeal, to a large extent. Apart from the APC that chose the Muslim-Muslim ticket with the perceived so aim of winning the northern key sling states densely populated by Muslims, the other three major parties picked their presidential candidates and their running mates from different religions. The Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) took Alhaji Atiku Abubakar (a Muslim) and Senator Ifeanyi Okowa (a Christian) as presidential and vice presidential candidates, respectively. The Labour Party (LP) chose Mr. Peter Obi (a Christian)

and Senator Datti Baba Almed (a Muslim) as presidential and vice presidential candidates, respectively; while The New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP) picked Senator Musa Rabiu Kwankwaso (a Muslim) and Bishop Idahosa (a Christian) as presidential and vice presidential candidates, respectively. These three parties choice of candidates across Christianity and Islam was pretext of providing religious balance as strategy to appeal to members of the two religions for support.

**Data Presentation and Analysis**

All the 250 copies of the questionnaire administered to the respondents were retrieved. The retrieved copies of the questionnaire were correctly completed by the respondents. Data presentation and analysis in this segment of the study are based on the retrieved copies of the questionnaire.

**Table 1: Respondents Sex Distribution**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Male	142	56.8	56.8	56.8
Female	108	43.2	43.2	100.0
Total	250	100.0	100.0	

The data displayed on table one above indicate that 142 (56.8%) of the respondents were male while 108 (43.2%) of them were female.

**Table 2: Respondents' Religion**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Christianity	126	50.4	50.4	50.4
Islam	115	46.0	46.0	96.4
Others	9	3.6	3.6	100.0
Total	250	100.0	100.0	

Table 2 shows that 126 (50.4%) of the respondents were Christians; 115 (46%) of them were Muslims and 9 (3.6%) of them belonged to other religions.

**Table 3: How Religious Appeals were used in 2023 Presidential Campaigns in Nigeria**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Choice of Candidates	122	48.8	48.8	48.8
Visit to Religious Groups	43	17.2	17.2	66.0
Religious Messages at Political Rallies	32	12.8	12.8	78.8
Actions and Messages of Religious Groups and Leaders	53	21.2	21.2	100.0
Total	250	100.0	100.0	

It is worthy to note that all the respondents (100%) stated that religious appeals were employed in the 2023 presidential election campaigns in Nigeria. Table 3 presents the ways in which religious appeals were used in the campaigns. From the table, 122 (48.8%) of the respondents believed that religious appeals were employed through parties choice of candidates; 43 (17.2%) of them ticked ‘visit to religious groups;’ 32 (12.8%) of them chose ‘religious messages at political rallies;’ while 53 (21.2%) of the respondents indicated that religious appeals were employed in the campaigns through the actions and messages of religious groups and their leaders.

**Table 4: Influence of Religious Appeals in 2023 presidential Campaigns in Nigeria on electorate’s Choice of Candidates**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Agree	104	41.6	41.6	41.6
Agree	98	39.2	39.2	80.8
Undecided	14	5.6	5.6	86.4
Disagree	18	7.2	7.2	93.6
Strongly Disagree	16	6.4	6.4	100.0
Total	250	100.0	100.0	

From the data on table 4, 104 (41.6%) of the respondents strongly agreed that use of religious appeals in the 2023 presidential campaigns in Nigeria influenced electorate’s choice of candidates; 98(39.2%) of them agreed to that view; 14 (5.6%) of them offered no opinion; 18 (7.2%) of them disagreed, while 16 (6.4%) of the respondents strongly disagreed to the view that

use of religious appeal influenced electorate's choice of candidates in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The findings of this study indicate that religious appeals were employed in the 2023 presidential election campaigns in Nigeria. The study found that the appeals came in the form of choice of candidates, visit to religious groups, religious messages at political rallies and actions and messages of religious groups and their leaders. These findings show that religion is still a determining factor in Nigerian politics. This implies that Nigeria is not truly a secular country in the true sense of secularization (Ndukwe and Iheaka, 2023; Offiong and Ekpo, 2020).

One other important finding of the study is that the use of religious appeals influenced electorate's choice of candidates in the 2023 presidential elections. Competence, capacity and track records are supposed to be guiding lights in the choice of candidates for elective positions in a truly secular country. If religious sentiments determine electorate's choice of candidates for elective positions, Nigeria's claim of secularism requires re-examination. This finding means that religion and politics still have some close relationship (Ogugua and Ogugua, 2015; Raiser, 2013; Bellin, 2008).

### **Conclusion**

This study has indicated that religion was used as a tool for political communication in the 2023 presidential election campaigns in Nigeria. The study found that the use of religious appeals influenced electorate's choice of candidates in the election. The implication is that religion is still one of the determining factors in Nigerian politics. This revelation puts a question mark on Nigeria's claim of secularism.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are based on the findings of the study.

1. Religion should be separated from politics in Nigeria.
2. Politicians and political parties should be prohibited from using religious appeals in their campaigns.

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